

## Discussion Questions for *Billy Budd*

1. In Chapter I Melville presents Billy Budd as a type—the “Handsome Sailor.” What characteristics do Billy and other handsome sailors possess? Why is Billy called the “jewel” of the *Rights of Man*? What elements of foreshadowing appear in this chapter?
2. In Chapter II Melville depicts Billy as both Hercules and Adam. What associations do these allusions suggest? What does his “vocal defect” tell us about him? (See the last line of chapter II)
3. Chapters III, IV, and V interrupt the story of Billy and provide historical background.  
In Chapter III Melville tells us that the British Navy is reeling from two recent mutinies (see handout for more background), influenced by the French Revolution of 9 years earlier.  
See the first sentence of Chapter IV for Melville’s unapologetic digression. How might the description of Admiral Nelson’s death tie into the story of Billy Budd?  
Chapter V describes the paranoia of the Navy after the mutinies and sets the scene for what will happen in the rest of the story.
4. Chapters VI and VII introduce the second character in Billy’s story, Captain Vere. What does Melville say of him? Like Billy, he has a “quirk”—what is it?
5. Chapter VIII introduces the third major player, John Claggert (note the initials—Melville’s joke, perhaps?) How is he Billy’s physical and moral opposite? Like Billy, his background is mysterious—what is the difference? Like Chillingworth, what talent does he possess? (see 2<sup>nd</sup> to last paragraph).
6. In Chapter IX Melville introduces plot complications—what are they?  
Another new character, the “Dansker,” is introduced; what is his relationship to Billy?
7. Chapter X features the soup-spilling incident. Why does Billy disregard Dansker’s warning?
8. Chapter XI opens with one of the central questions of the book, and Melville tries to answer it in this and in the next 4 chapters. What are some of the answers he comes up with?
9. Why do we see Billy stutter for the first time in Chapter XV?  
Why does Dansker in Chapter XVI interpret the incident the way he does?  
In Chapter XVII what important point does Melville make about Billy’s innocence? How is his innocence dangerous?

10. In Chapter XVIII tension builds. Notice Melville's description of Claggert—what do you detect in his attitude toward Billy and in Melville's description of him? At the end of the chapter, what kind of inquiries has Billy begun to make?
11. In Chapter XIX, what is Vere's attitude toward Claggert? How does Claggert take advantage of the tenseness surrounding potential mutiny? What does Claggert mean when he says, "A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies"? In contrast to his opinion of Claggert, how does Vere feel about Billy?
12. In Chapter XX, Claggert makes his accusation—note the imagery associated with him. What imagery is applied to Billy? Why does Vere call Billy "Fated Boy"? What does he mean by, "Struck down by an angel of God. Yet the angel must hang!"?
13. In Chapter XXI how does the ship's surgeon feel the matter should be handled?
14. Chapter XII, Billy's trial, is the longest chapter in the book and begins with an odd question. How does this question fit in with the content?  
 What is the paradox regarding Billy and Claggert?  
 In his speech to the court, what distinctions does Vere draw between Nature and Law? Private conscience and the navy code?  
 Explain what he means by "War looks but to the frontage, the appearances."
15. In Chapter XXIII what aspect of the relationship between Vere and Billy does Melville emphasize? Why does this make the dilemma more poignant?
16. In Chapter XXIV how does Vere minimize the effect of Billy's sentencing and Claggert's death for the crew?
17. How does Melville account for Billy's attitude toward death in Chapter XXV?
18. With what imagery does Melville invest Billy's death in Chapter XXVI?
19. Why does Melville interrupt the scene of Billy's hanging with the digression in XVIII? What phenomenon does the Purser note with regard to Billy's death?
20. What does Vere mean in Chapter XXVIII by "forms, measured forms are everything"?
21. How does the newspaper account in Chapter XXX differ from the "truth"?
22. Look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> account of Billy Budd, the ballad "Billy in the Darbies." What details does it leave out? What details does it leave in? What details does it add? What echoes of the main story do you hear? Why do you think Melville chose to end the book in this way?